



## LOCALIZED PEACE IN A WEAPONIZED ENVIRONMENT: INTERROGATING COMMUNITY-DRIVEN PEACEBUILDING MECHANISMS AGAINST ARMED BANDITRY IN NIGERIA'S NORTHWEST

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### Abstract

The protracted armed banditry and its associated threats to peace and security are gradually turning Nigeria's Northwest into another regional theatre of violence. There is palpable tension and heightened fear of possible replica in the magnitude of Boko Haram insurgency attacks in the Northwest if decisive and urgent steps are not taken. Although State-level peace efforts have had some initial success in the areas of weapon surrendering and releasing of kidnapped victims, these have however not mitigated the threats that the recurring armed banditry poses to peace and security desired by the region. As a qualitative research, Focus Group Discussion (FGD) and Key Informant Interview (KII) were conducted with relevant non-state actors on the application of community-driven peacebuilding and conflict transformation approaches and their successes in this current dispensation. Data generated from the field were complemented by reviewed literature. As the epicentre of the armed banditry, the focus of this paper was consciously restricted to only Zamfara State in order to interrogate community interventions in a more context-specific manner. Among other things, this paper underscores the relevance of localised peace as a veritable tool for building sustainable peace and tackling conflict at its source by recommending solutionist strategies to state actors and others alike, just for the sake of peace in Zamfara State and the Northwest as a whole. The study emphasizes in its conclusion that security challenges in the region

have deeply local roots and therefore require community conflict transformation efforts and traditional peacebuilding interventions as alternative methods of building sustainable peace and promoting peaceful co-existence in a weaponized environment like Nigeria's Northwest.

**Key Words:** Armed banditry, peace, violence, conflict, Northwest

## **Introduction**

Armed banditry-related violence in the Northwest is complex and interrelated. The violence is provoked by several overlapping factors, including cattle rustling, small arms proliferation and light weapons, illicit artisanal mining, youth unemployment, poverty, and inequality (Campbell, 2020). International Crisis Group (ICG) (2020) traces banditry to a historic conflict that has its roots in clashes between nomadic Fulani pastoralists and local farmers over access to land and water resources. The activities of the armed group called bandits became noticeably prevalent over a decade ago in the Northwest and in the past few years, the crisis has worsened severely, snowballing into a full-blown criminality. Banditry is the general name ascribed to these chains of organized crimes such as kidnapping, cattle rustling, rape, murder, mass abduction, arson and armed robbery. According to Hassan and Barnett (2022), one cannot specifically establish the origin of the banditry crisis but it can be said that it evolves coincidentally with the worsening rural insecurity in the Northwest. In the late 2000s, criminal activities alongside rural banditry steadily escalated, climaxing in the launching of the first major violent attack in the early 2000s.

Barnett et al (2022) loosely described banditry in Nigeria as operations or activities engaged by criminally hardened rural gangs to rust cattle, loot villages, extort local communities, and kidnap for ransom. The interests of these bandits are largely economic. While some are lured into armed banditry by financial gains, political or ideological convictions propelled others to commit murder, and other violent destructive atrocities. Even though, the banditry crisis has attracted significant attention nationally and globally, that has however not stopped the perpetrators from becoming more audacious and deadly. Indeed, such attacks which were originally confined to rural communities have been extended to major cities, highways and critical infrastructures (ACCORD, 2023).

In many communities, the bandits have become so powerful and assumed authority by constituting 'an alternative government' without hindrance. The bandits have been very calculating and strategic in their operations considering that they are already building local legitimacy to gain acceptance and the support of the people. Hassan and Barnett (2022) narrate how the bandits have embarked on providing basic human needs and rendering essential services such as sharing foods, building mosques (like the big mosque constructed by a bandit warlord in Lambar Gabas Zurmi), mediating in communities' disputes and raising awareness about the grievances of herdsman. They are daringly influential to the extent that the bandits resolve local disputes, impose taxes on communities collect rents and operate illicit mining businesses (Jamiu, 2024). To further consolidate their influence, Madueke et al (2024) affirm that since 2022, the bandits have been directly involved in illegal mining activities as a means of widening their source of income and expanding their revenue base.

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There is a growing concern and heightened fear that the surge in banditry-related violence could escalate and rival the Boko Haram insurgency, thus putting the Northwest at risk of becoming another regional theatre of violence. Buttressing this argument, Okoli and Ugwu (2019) maintain that the levels of casualties and the attendant humanitarian devastations so far recorded as a result of armed banditry in the Northwest can be equated to that of Boko Haram onslaught in the Northeast and even capable of transcending the atrocities committed by the insurgents. It is in light of this that the West Africa Network of Peacebuilding (WANEP) (2019) reported that within a space of 12 months, between January and December 2019, armed bandits accounted for the death of over 1,000 civilians in the Northwest which surpassed the civilian fatalities suffered in the hands of Boko Haram over the same period. Samuel (2021) further claims that some of the Boko Haram insurgents have even infiltrated the ranks of the bandits by joining forces with them to raid and loot villages and commit mass abductions for ransom from helpless citizens.

These violent attacks have created multitude of the destitute, orphans and widows across the rural areas in the Northwest. Nweze (2019) reveals that between June 2011 and May 2019, 4,983 women were widowed; 25,000 children became orphans and more than 190,000 people were displaced as a result of armed banditry in Zamfara State alone. Between 2011 and 2019, the persistent violence in Zamfara state resulted in the death of more than 8,000 people and caused the displacement of over 200,000 Nigerians, with about 60,000 seeking refuge in Niger Republic (ICG, 2020). Adebajo and Ibrahim (2024) estimate that from 2019 to 2024, bandit attacks have resulted in the deaths of 9,200 civilians in the Northwest. The region, being the most affected, has borne the full brunt of the insecurity crisis in Nigeria, accounting for almost two-thirds of all victims thus surpassing the combined victims of all other regions in Nigeria.

In response to these heinous attacks by the bandits, federal authority according to Akintunde-Johnson (2021) launched and deployed security forces under different operations like 'Puff Adder', 'Diran Mikiya', 'Sharan Daji', 'Hadarin Daji', 'Thunder Strike', 'Exercise Harbin Kunama 111' and 'Sahel Sanity' to nip the crisis in the bud. Others include Maximum Safety, Absolute Sanity, Egwu Eke III, Tsaftar Daji, Fansan Yamma, and Safe Corridor. Beyond launching military operations, the federal government at various times also banned illegal mining, declared a no-fly zone in Zamfara, shut down telecoms networks and designated bandits as terrorists (Mohammed, 2022; Elusoji, 2022). Individual state governments in the Northwest have equally adopted kinetic and non-kinetic approaches to maintain peace and return normalcy to the region. Such measures include closing access roads to bandits, banning inter-state transporting of cattle, prohibiting the sale of fuel in jerry cans, rehabilitating and reintegrating the repentant bandits and cattle rustlers, negotiating with the bandits and providing them amnesty. But these operations and peace initiatives have failed to stop the attacks or at best temporarily halted the criminal activities of the armed bandits.

Due to the ineffectiveness of the state's response and a lack of public trust in the government and its security forces, communities are increasingly turning to localized, community-driven peacebuilding initiatives to address the situation.

The involvement of local communities in taking collective responsibility to build a peace that is sustainable against violent extremism has rarely been given scholarly attention in the Northwest.

It is against this background that this research was conceptualized to investigate various community-driven conflict transformation and peacebuilding interventions that are being employed by critical non-state actors, focusing specifically on Zamafara state as the epicenter of the armed banditry. This study, therefore, focuses specifically on assessing localized peacebuilding efforts and community-driven strategies, identifying the barriers that hinder the mitigation of armed banditry in Zamfara State, and proposing sustainable and inclusive solutions. The subsidiary objectives guiding this research are: to identify and evaluate the specific traditional peacebuilding mechanisms employed at the grassroots; to examine other community-driven peacebuilding and conflict transformation approaches adopted by diverse non-state actors; and to investigate the levels of complementarity of state-level peace efforts and localized peace interventions of non-state actors.

To achieve these objectives, the study is guided by the following research questions: What are the specific traditional peacebuilding mechanisms employed at the grassroots? What are the other community-driven peacebuilding and conflict transformation approaches adopted by diverse non-state actors? And finally, how are state-level peace efforts complementing localized peace interventions of non-state actors?

By examining the above research questions, this study foregrounds its focus on understanding community-led peace efforts and providing insights that will help in addressing armed banditry violent attacks. This approach provides a clear roadmap for the research while situating it within the broader discourse on security challenges in the Northwest. The deficiencies of the reactionary rather than proactive approach of addressing banditry-related violence in Zamfara state in particular and northwest as a whole necessitates the conduct of this research

## **Review of Related Literature**

*“To meet the peacebuilding needs of the 21st century . . . more genuinely empowering forms of grassroots mobilization and local-international partnership are needed”* (Funk, 2012:396).

Non-state traditional actors and their approaches to peacebuilding and conflict prevention deserve due consideration particularly when complementing with state or civil society-led contemporary conflict transformation interventions (Boege, 2006). For a community-based early warning system to be effective, Radice and Tekle (2011) identify four basic requirements as follows: I. Individuals and institutions must understand the reality of the dangers befalling them II. People should be able to monitor, evaluate and foretell impending hazards III. There should be access to information communication and dissemination about a change in threats, alerts and warnings and IV. People in the community should be empowered with adequate knowledge to respond to warnings. ACCORD (2022) emphasizes that when incorporating peacebuilding frameworks, it is important to bring together both state and non-state actors like civil society organizations and traditional institutions because they are equipped with the knowledge to act swiftly to early warning signals, redesign community practices and policies of government and clamour for completely new policies to combat the root causes of violent conflicts.

Nbiwirire and Karu (2018) observe that addressing conflicts in Africa, using traditional institutions demands the use of community beliefs, morals and attitudes, social order and procedures, authorities and structures as well as cultural practices. These belief systems, morals and cultural

practices are based on the appreciation of reconciliation found in the cultural practices enshrined in the African Traditional Region (ATR). For parties in conflict to trust and believe in the legitimacy of the peacemaking process without undermining the resolution reached, traditional practice should be incorporated into the peace framework. (Magnström, 2019). ACCORD (2022) reports that looking at typical African societies, community leaders play central roles in the establishment of community forums where various issues are addressed which include town hall functions, mediation and dialogues, sensitization and awareness-raising, early warning and response, and information hubs. Other relevant community stakeholders who can also partake in the forum include religious leaders, community-based association leaders, government officials, security actors, and non-state armed groups.

Boege (2006) asserts that conflict transformation initiatives that have proven fruitful at the local level are now increasingly advocated for, due to highly localized nature of several modern violent conflicts occurring in the global south. Roll (2016) admits that there is an increasing clamour by global institutions now for local participation where local communities take the lead in the peace process and assume 'local ownership' including post-conflict reconstruction interventions. Furthermore, allowing communities to take active roles in finding solutions to the problems that concern them will spur a sense of ownership and responsibility, leading to better commitments and stronger support for the issue. This is particularly so in the context of banditry with its complex and multidimensional problem which deserves cooperation and participation of all stakeholders (ACCORD, 2023).

While making reference to the past experience Boege (2006) infers that implementing solutions at the top alone without engaging the people at the local level cannot produce sustainable results. Indeed, it is at the grassroots that traditional conflict resolution approaches are most effective. Davies (2016) explains that effective peacebuilding initiatives mostly originate from community practices and local customs which are sometimes scaled up to a national framework to enable durable and effective interventions. To start with, tradition and culture hold the key to peacemaking (Magnström, 2019). The emphasis on community participation is based on increasing support for community-led initiatives and the advantages inherent in tailoring national and global policy strategies to suit local realities and by also including people at the grassroots in peacebuilding efforts (Nextier SPD, 2020). Akande et al (2021) believe that the intention of building sustainable peace stems from the long-term societal harmonious relationship in which local wisdom was built into national policies to achieve systems that are holistic and of best practices.

Understanding and addressing the different perspectives and interests of conflicting parties through psychological processes can strengthen commitments to work as a team and promote confidence-building in evolving resolutions (Jeong, 2009). Akande et al (2021) argue that when intervention processes are all-inclusive and collaborative, conditions for sustainable and satisfactory solutions are achievable. Akintunde-Johnson (2021) however clarifies that achieving sustainable peace lies with the government by building trust with the local communities susceptible to bandits' attacks

Botes (2003) points out that the credibility of traditional institutions together with their local knowledge and social capital prepare them in involving in peacebuilding initiatives because these qualities will facilitate support, build trust and promote stakeholders' collaboration. Nbiwirire and

Kurwa (2018) explain that traditional institutions are dependable pillars in promoting peaceful co-existence at the community level. Effective and continuous communication during conflict and in post-conflict environments is responsible for the success of traditional institutions. It is not only within the cycle of scholars and practitioners of conflict management that traditional peacebuilding has gained popular support, Nigerian populace has equally canvassed for its restoration and mainstreaming into the broader national security architecture to tackle rising insecurity Osaghae (2024).

Ogbozor (2016) in his study of informal security sector in Nigeria acknowledges that most Nigerians prefer dealing with local security forces because they are more reliable and accessible than government security men who are largely unavailable. Integrating community members as local defence groups will promote a sense of ownership which can transform to cohesion and resilience amidst a surge in conflict (Bamidele, 2024). Gurdan (2025) confirms that vigilante groups have proven to be effective in the protection of lives and properties and crime reduction in Nigeria and across the world.

### **Situational Analysis of Banditry in the Northwest**

Okoli and Ugwu (2019) refer to banditry as a historical conflict that has worsened dramatically overtime due to competition over land and water resources. The crisis as established by ICG (2020) started in 2011, and intensified rapidly from 2014 with nomadic herders in connivance with armed groups called bandits on the one side and sedentary farmers of varying ethnic groups backed by communities and state-recognized vigilantes on the other side. Several deadly attacks resulting in huge loss of human lives and mass abduction have been traceable to the bandits largely dominated by the ethnic Fulanis. ICG (2020) reports that between 2011 and 2019 more than 3,600 people were reportedly kidnapped only in Zamfara state and over 1000 students were whisked away in 2021 out of which more than 200 were school children (Akinwotu, 2021). The spate of mass abductions of students plaguing the region has disrupted schooling and further worsened the out-of-school situation thereby pushing many schoolchildren into the street as beggars and child labourers. Persistent attacks have led to either occasional shutdown or outright closure of all schools in the affected States with over one million children in the region not attending classes because of banditry in Nigeria (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2021). As of the end of 2022, more than 1 million people have suffered banditry-induced displacement and from 2010 to May 2023, bandits killed 13, 485 people (Ojewale, 2024). Adebajo and Ibrahim (2024) estimate that from 2019 to 2024, bandit attacks have resulted in the deaths of 9,200 civilians in the Northwest.

ICG (2020) explains that due to limited security presence to repel attacks against the bandits and secure their communities, young and agile men in the Hausa enclaves came together and formed vigilante groups otherwise known as *yan sa kai* in various villages and settlements. In the process, the *yan sa kai themselves* constituted a security threat and started attacking real and imaginary 'enemies' believed to have raided and robbed them of their belongings most especially Fulani-dominated settlements. The assumption was that they have connections with the blood thirsty Fulani militia who were committing criminal activities. Fulanis too mobilized themselves and formed armed groups called *yan-bindiga* (gun owners) to protect their cattle and defend themselves against vigilante assaults. While, *yan sa kai* fight with local and crude weaponry, the bandits make use of sophisticated artilleries largely acquired through the proceeds of kidnapping activities (Ibid).

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Hassan and Barnett (2022) assert that most of the herdsmen who initially acquired arms for protection have since transitioned to adopt a more ruthless and violent approach, from cattle rustling to kidnapping and lately illegal mining (Adebayo & Ibrahim, 2024).

Nigeria's North West according to ICG (2020) is currently facing one of the worst insecurity challenges involving many armed groups including herder-allied groups, vigilantes, criminal gangs and jihadists. Ozigbo (2020) reports that the bandits are so emboldened that they move around freely and brandishing dangerous weapons without being challenged by the security forces, making the region the worst place to live in Nigeria. This banditry violence is generating mounting apprehension and has become a source of concern not only within the region but across Nigeria due to the frequency and intensity of the attacks on the vulnerable communities (Umaru, 2020). Cable (2021) affirms that there are about one hundred bandits' groups operating in the forest of six Northern states, representing more than 30,000 militants and as confirmed by Rufa'i (2021) about one-third of these bandits are operating from Zamfara. The operational activities of the bandits which are initially limited to the rural areas from its epicenter in Zamfara state, have since expanded to Kano, Kaduna, Katsina, Kebbi and Sokoto states in the Northwest and spread further into Niger state in the Northcentral (Hassan and Barnett, 2022) Jamiu (2024) estimates that the escalation of the banditry violence which started several years ago has resulted in the deaths of 12,000 civilians in the Northwest of Sokoto, Kebbi, Zamfara, Katsina, Kaduna, and parts of the states in the North-Central. At least 700, 000 people in Zamfara and other affected states in the Northwest have been displaced due to this insecurity (Adebajo and Ibrahim, 2024)

As security deteriorated in the Northwest, residents are worried that some of the bandits have joined forces with jihadists. Evidence abounds and is further confirmed by the Nigerian military of the influx of the jihadists associated with Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province, taking advantage of the internal security lapses and porosity of the international border to exert their influence. It has been argued that banditry is now the financial arm of the Boko Haram as the insurgents are exploiting the criminalities in the Northwest by occupying states like Zamfara, Katsina, Sokoto, Kebbi, Niger, and Kaduna States to seek alternative sources and further finance their devilish activities (Donald, 2021, Samuel, 2021).

### **Tackling Armed Banditry through State-Level Peace Initiatives**

The federal government's attempts to contain armed banditry in the Northwest have largely relied on the use of kinetic approaches through increased troops' presence and launching several military operations. Such operations according to Umar (2020) and ICG (2020) include Puff Adder, Diran Mikiya, Sharan Daji, Hadarin Daji, Thunder Strike, Harbin Kunama 1-111 Sahel Sanity, Maximum Safety, Absolute Sanity, Egwu Eke III, Tsaftar Daji, Fansan Yamma, and Safe Corridor. The military has claimed some success through these operations. Hideouts of bandits have been bombed consistently and many killed in the process. Quite a lot of them were arrested and hundreds of kidnapped people rescued but attacks have continued without any sign of abating. More disturbing is the incessant aerial bombing of armed bandits' enclaves by security forces which have accidentally killed many innocent citizens, turning them into victims of dual attacks- one from the security forces and the other from the bandits. Even when the military raid successfully eliminated the bandits, there have always been reprisal attacks. One of such deadliest reprisal attacks occurred in January 2020. Following the military airstrike on their hideouts, the bandits

staged a reprisal attack a week later, leading to the death of more than 200 people and the displacement of 10,000 innocent citizens in Zamfara state (Akinwotu, 2022).

Apart from the deployment of police and military operations to the Northwest, Mohammed (2022) points out that the federal government has equally imposed other stringent measures such as blockades of telecommunication networks, movement restriction through curfew, introduction of National Identification Number (NIN) to curb kidnapping and other forms of insecurity, suspension of all forms of mining activities. Other non-kinetic responses employed by the federal government include banning the use of motorcycles within the hinterland and forests of banditry vulnerable states (Zamfara Katsina, Sokoto, Kaduna, Kebbi, Kano and Niger), declaration of a no-fly zone in Zamfara state to check unauthorized aircraft aiding bandits and proclamation of bandits as terrorists. Many people believed that the designation of bandits as terrorists in January 2022 (Elusoji, 2022), after weeks of foot-dragging would attract total clampdown with more efficient securitization of the hotspots. That has however not translated to stopping or restraining the armed groups from attacking communities almost unhindered and with significant fatalities too. For instance, almost immediately after the bandits were declared terrorists, there was a deadly attack in Zamfara that claimed the lives of about 200 people with many unaccounted for (Aljazeera, 2022).

Amid this recurrent menace and the failure of the federal troops to deal with the brutal attacks unleashed by the bandits, state governments had to seek alternative ways of countering banditry violence by supporting the establishment of local vigilantes and empowering them. The vigilantes are provided with logistical support including paying them a paltry salary. Social Intervention Programmes aimed at empowering the citizens and reducing the hardship caused by the banditry menace had been introduced at one time or the other where the beneficiaries would be posted to government offices or trained on various vocational skills to become self-reliant.

State governments also extended amnesty to the bandits which resulted in some of them renouncing their criminal activities and releasing kidnapped victims in exchange for cash, cattle and other incentives. Apart from the amnesty agreement embarked upon by the individual state, Zamfara, Sokoto and Katsina states jointly established in 2019 a committee on amnesty dialogue to specifically fashion out a plan for ending banditry in the three states (Brenner, 2021). The position of the state government then was that negotiation was the best way to achieve lasting peace. The amnesty efforts did yield some positive results by temporarily halting the bandits' onslaughts but not enough to end the violence. Unlike in the past when governments of most of the affected states seem to have taken a common front to tackle Banditry, there was no consensus among the present state governments. While Kaduna state has established a Peace Dialogue Group to broker peace with the bandits, Katsina state has vowed to never negotiate with the bandits but will only reach an accord and reintegrate willing repentants into the society. Although the Nigerian military under 'Operation Safe Corridor' in collaboration with local authorities in Katsina and critical stakeholders are striking peace agreements with the bandits which has seen many of them repented in some local governments like Danmusa, Jibia, Batsari, and Safari. For Sokoto and Zamfara, after initial reluctance, the state governments have backtracked and also expressed their readiness to toe the path of Kaduna state and seek a peace deal with the bandits.

However, the federal government has ordered the military to bring an end to banditry by 2025. That is a tall order as successive governments have made similar demands to no avail. It also brings

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to the fore that the government is yet to fully appreciate the magnitude and complexity of the crisis and this could as well be the reason why the violence has persisted for so long.

### **Methodology**

This study adopted Focus Group Discussion (FGD) and Key Informant Interview (KII) as a qualitative research technique to generate rich, more insightful responses and detailed findings. FGDs and KIIs formed the primary data for this study. This approach was deemed most appropriate for investigating complex social phenomena like community peacebuilding, as it allows for the exploration of participants' experiences, perceptions, and motivations in their own words. Secondary data were sourced from relevant literature including books, scholarly articles, media reports, policy documents and relevant internet sources.

The study population consists of participants drawn from a diverse range of stakeholders to elicit different experiences and perspectives, vigilante/local hunters, youth groups, women associations, Miyetti Allah cattle breeders' association, community-based organizations, religious bodies, district heads/community leaders, farmers associations, and civil societies.

Twelve gender and age-diverse FGDs were conducted with a total of 72 participants, with each group comprising six individuals. The groups were organized by stakeholder type to facilitate productive and open dialogue. The distribution was as follows:

- Vigilante Members (2 FGDs): Conducted in Tsafe and Gusau.
- Youth Groups (2 FGDs): Conducted in Anka and Gusau.
- Women Associations (2 FGDs): Conducted in Gusau and Shinkafi.
- Farmers (2 FGDs): Conducted in Shinkafi and Tsafe.
- Community Elders/Leaders (2 FGDs): Conducted in Anka and Tsafe.
- Mixed Groups (Herders & Farmers) (2 FGDs): Conducted in Anka and Shinkafi.

Key informants were purposively selected based on their knowledge, leadership position, and experience in managing or observing peacebuilding processes. They included: a total of 10 KIIs were conducted. The distribution includes:

- Traditional Rulers/District Heads (2): Selected for their overarching authority and role in conflict mediation.
- Religious Leaders (2): Islamic clerics (Imams) known to be involved in peace talks and preaching against violence.
- Leaders of Vigilante Groups (2): Commanders of Vigilante Group of Nigeria (VGN).
- Leaders of Farmers/Herders Associations (2): A representative from the Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association (MACBAN) and a leader from a prominent farmers' association.
- Community-Based Organization (CBO) Leaders (2): Leaders of local groups actively involved in peace advocacy or humanitarian support.

The study applied purposeful sampling to pick participants based on their knowledge, relevance and familiarity with the issue under investigation. The study also purposively selected

communities with histories of violent conflicts but also visible peacebuilding practices. Five local government were picked and within each LGA, specific communities known to be highly vulnerable and severely impacted by banditry were selected for the FGDs and KIIs. These include:

- Tsafe LGA: Kunkumi, Kuraga, and Kizara.
- Anka LGA: Bagega, Yargaladima, and Anka.
- Shinkafi LGA: Shinkafi Town, Shanawa, and Fakai.
- Gusau LGA: Mada and Wonaka
- Zumi LGA: Farka and Moriki

These communities were chosen to provide comparative insights into different conflict dynamics and peacebuilding strategies within a weaponized environment.

Justification for purposive sampling stems from the fact that the research aim was not to achieve statistical generalization but to gain an in-depth understanding of community-driven peacebuilding mechanisms from those with direct and relevant experience. Purposive sampling was therefore the most appropriate technique as it allows for the deliberate selection of participants who possess specific knowledge and lived experience related to armed banditry and peacebuilding efforts. Also, given the volatile security situation in the state, random sampling was impractical and potentially dangerous. Purposive sampling allowed for safe and targeted engagement with accessible and willing participants.

Non-participatory observation was employed as a supplementary data collection method. The researchers assumed the role of detached observers, systematically witnessing and recording events and behaviors within the natural setting of the studied communities without actively participating or intervening. This approach minimized researcher bias and provided firsthand, naturalistic insights into community life and peacebuilding practices.

Data were obtained, with the aid of research assistants, through semi-structured interviews to explore collective experiences and norms. The collected data were tape-recorded, transcribed, and content analyzed. The collection of data for this research started in 2023 and was concluded in 2024.

## **Presentation of Findings**

In a bid to elicit information on non-state actors' peacebuilding interventions against armed banditry in Zamfara State, KIIs and FGDs were conducted with target respondents. The following is the presentation of the responses received from the respondents based on the designed research questions

### **Research Question**

(1) Traditional Peacebuilding Mechanisms Employed at the Grassroots: Insights from Kunkumi and Kuraga (Tsafe local government), Anka and Bagega (Anka local government), Shikafi and Shanawa (Shikafi local government) and Mada and Wonaka communities (Gusau local government).

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Drawing from FGD participants' responses particularly, among community leaders, youth and women groups, the following are some of the specific traditional approaches employed at the grassroots to build peace: (a) Traditional festival (b) Trade by barter system (c) Inter-marriage and (d) Village drama

(a) Traditional festival: This is organized across different communities in Zamfara state to facilitate interactions and maintain cordiality by bringing people together across different walks of life. FGD informants (community leaders) from Kunkumi and Kuraga in Tsafe local government and (youth groups) in Anka and Bagega communities in Anka local government emphasized the relevance of traditional festivals as a localized peace building effort. Below are some of the responses that FGDs generated:

*"Shadi" is a traditional festival that both Hausa and Fulani communities employ as a grassroots peacebuilding mechanism where we normally invite people from different clans to come and demonstrate and dramatize their talent before a large gathering. It is a unifying practice for merrymaking dedicated to special occasions. The festival provides a strong platform for Hausas, Fulanis and other tribes to mingle, exchange pleasantries and forget their differences, to promote peace and harmony. However, rising distrust among different ethnic groups in the state and loss of confidence in government are some of the challenges militating against staging such festivals. Hausas cannot risk going to the Fulani settlements and vice-versa (Tsafe FGD)*

*Organizing traditional a "sharo" festival is one of our own community efforts of getting fully involved in localized traditional peacebuilding to enhance social cohesion and guarantee community peace. Non-Fulani communities and other ethnic groups are invited into the community to witness and participate during sharo festive period. Through this initiative, friendships and relationships are built and bonds are cemented. In fact, through this avenue, many people get to understand the genesis of the banditry crisis and separate truth from falsehood, thereby allowing peace to reign (Anka FGD)*

(b) Trade by barter system: The use of barter as an ancient method to overcome dispute and insecurity challenges is very common within the Hausa-Fulani settings. This is highlighted among the FGD informants (farmers) in Shikafi and Shanawa communities in Shikafi local government area:

*This is an old way of promoting harmonious relationships among us through trade by barter system. In the beginning, Fulanis do come to our communities with herds of animals and we offer our farmlands for them to settle, we will provide them with animal feeds and they will give*

*us inorganic manure in exchange which in turn helps us to have good farm produce. We also exchange cow milk for money or some of our local dishes. Now we are reviving this historical peacebuilding initiative to have a better sense of tolerance and build harmonious relationships among one another (Shikafi FGD).*

(c) Inter-marriage: Inter-marriage provides cross-cutting loyalties, promotes communal relations and turns competition into cooperation among varying ethnic groups. FGDs conducted among the women groups in Mada and Wonaka communities in Gusau local government reveal that:

*Yes, we as women are playing very big but underappreciated roles in peacebuilding efforts across communities. We encourage Fulani suitors to come to Hausa communities and vice-versa and seek our daughters' hand in marriage. So many of them are obliging us because of the trust we are building across board so that the practice will continue. It worked in the past and is still working now as one of the easiest ways of promoting peaceful coexistence. No sensible person will attack his or her in-law or any family members (Gusau FGD).*

(d) Village drama: Village dramas were organized in Shinawa community (Shinkafi local government) and Kuraga community (Tsafe local government). The effectiveness of drama as a traditional peacebuilding tool cannot be overemphasized. This has been aptly demonstrated across different ethnic groups in Nigeria and within the continent of Africa. The armed banditry in Zamfara state provides a rich and interesting insight into how drama has been and is being used as tools for peace-building and reconciliation

*Before the ban on weekly markets in the state, we mostly organized drama in the village square to showcase the dangers of engaging in criminal activities including banditry. The drama competitions were held in communities of Shinkafi and some parts of Tsafe but were stopped abruptly because most times the events ended up in bloodshed (Shinkafi and Tsfae FGDs).*

## **Research Question**

2. Community-driven Peacebuilding and Conflict Transformation Approaches to Mitigate Banditry and Promote Peace: Initiatives from Shinkafi (Shinkafi local government), Farka and Moriki (Zumi local government), Kizara (Tsfae local government) and Yargaladima communities (Anka local government).

As revealed by different non-state actors interviewed, these are some of the community-driven approaches tailored towards peacebuilding and conflict transformation in the state: (a) localized

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peace education (b) Moulud celebration(c) establishment of grassroots network (d)negotiation between communities and leaders of the armed bandit (e)Football competition

(a) Localized peace education: The impacts of peace education as a veritable tool for preventing and resolving conflict and creating conditions for peace have been proven and well established. All the major religions have peace messages that abhor violence, encourage social cohesion and promote peaceful co-existence. It is in this regard that KIIs were conducted among respected Islamic clerics in Shinkafi community as partners in conflict resolution and peacebuilding initiatives. Their responses are narrated thus:

*Our roles as Islamic clerics and Imams entail total dedication and commitment to advance peaceful coexistence. We frequently visit Fulani settlements on Fridays after Jumuat prayers and engage the bandit leaders in peace talk with the aim of educating them that Islam abhors killing people, destroying property and causing mayhem in the society (Shinkafi KII)*

It will be recalled that a prominent Islamic scholar and medical Doctor Abubakar Gumi has been at the forefront of ensuring peaceful resolution of banditry activities by visiting the bandits at their enclaves. This goes to show the influence that religious leaders wield in the society as a conflict manager and peace- builder

(b) *Moulud* celebration: Maulud Islamic is a significant festival among adherents of Islam in the Northern part of Nigeria. The then Zanfara state Governor, Bello Matawallehad to seek the hosting right of the 2022 Maulud international celebration in the State where over two million people participated across Africa and beyond. The theme of that Maulud “Al-Sheik Ibrahim Inyass, an Antidote to Insecurity for Peaceful Coexistence” underscores the relevance of the occasion. Across Muslim communities and cities, Maulud is also celebrated. During one of the KII sessions with an Islamic scholar in Yargaladima community of Anka local government, he explained how Maulud is being used to address banditry violence in the state:

*We organize Moulud celebrations in Fulani settlements where we mobilize Fulani clerics resident in the city to demonstrate and preach the importance of peace and unity in our state. Sometimes, we organize short drama during the celebration to showcase the dangers as well as consequences of banditry. We have achieved a lot through this channel. During one of the celebrations, one of the bandit leaders and his followers attended our event. He publicly confessed that this is the first time he would be made to understand the kind of atrocities they are committing and the multiplier effects on farming practices, business activities and so forth in their localities. He vowed to shun banditry and also promised to convey the messages to his retinues (Anka KII)*

(C) Negotiation between communities and leaders of the armed bandit in Faka and Moriki (Zumi local government):

*We have had several peace dialogues and negotiations with armed bandit leaders for them to allow us to cultivate our farmlands, we negotiated and agreed to pay a certain amount of money just for peace to reign. Sometimes, we fixed specific amount of money per house head or based on each farmer in the affected communities but they are all short-lived and could not bring enduring peace. They are fond of deceiving and betraying us. Money would be collected and yet still attack us. However, in some communities like Fakai and Moriki, the negotiation yielded positive results because the bandits kept to their promises and allowed us to cultivate our farmlands (Zumi KII).*

Narratives from FGD participants from Kizara community in Tsafe:

*In Kizara village, we do meet with both Fulani members and bandit leaders in every farming season to reach an agreement and avert possible attacks. Sometimes, we give them money to allow us to have access to our farmlands. Although there was a time when a faceless group attacked some of our people that both the communities and the bandits could not even identify (Tsafe FGDs\_*

(d) Establishment of grassroots networks:

KII conducted for a youth leader from SabonGari in Gusau local government

*Like here in Gusau, we have what we call peace engagement volunteers of which I am one of the leaders representing SabonGari community. We were trained by the state government in collaboration with Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution in Abuja. Our mandate is de-escalating conflict situations, amplifying positive narratives and building peace in our various communities to improve peaceful coexistence (Gusau KII).*

### **Research Question**

3. Complementarity of State and Local Peace Efforts: Perspectives from Bagega (Anka local government), Mada and Womaka communities (Gusau local government).

Response from community leaders during FGD in Bagega community in Anka local government:

*Our relationship with security agents is very collaborative, supportive and cooperative. Many of us here in this discussion group are members of one security committee or the other. Also, we have a larger security committee with membership drawn across all security agencies including local security outfits (VGN), traditional rulers, trade unions*

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*and so forth. So, we are working together with security agencies with a common purpose of addressing and overcoming the insecurity challenges caused by various armed groups in the state (Anka FGD).*

Response from the youth group during FGD in Mada community in Gusau local government:

*In fairness to the state government, it has been supporting our local security outfits with logistics and incentives. Recently the state government directed all LGAs in the state to give each member of VGN operating in the LGA a certain amount of money and a motorcycle as incentives and logistics. Unfortunately, some LGA Chairmen and politicians were not fair and just in the distribution of the motorcycle and the money. They diverted the incentives to their relatives and political thugs (Gusau FGD).*

Response from the Vigilantes during FGD in Womaka community in Gusau local government:

*Membership is largely drawn from hunters and retired soldiers. We have been very proactive in our responses to banditry activities by carrying out some successful operations jointly with security agencies in the state. We have several members who belong to VGN in the state. Each ward has more than forty members and has been trained recently by the Nigeria Army, DSS, Police and Civil Defence. Our knowledge of the terrains and hideouts of the criminals is helping government security operatives to achieve some levels of success in combating the bandits (Gusau FGD).*

### **Discussion of Findings**

#### **1. Traditional Peacebuilding Mechanisms at the Grassroots**

The study revealed that communities in Zamfara employ culturally rooted practices to foster peace, including:

- **Traditional Festivals (e.g., Shadi, Sharo):** These events serve as platforms for interethnic interaction, reconciliation, and cultural exchange. However, rising distrust and government inefficacy hinder their effectiveness.
- **Trade by Barter:** Reviving this historical practice promotes economic interdependence and reduces tensions between Hausa farmers and Fulani herders.
- **Inter-marriage:** Women play a critical but under recognized role in peacebuilding by fostering cross-ethnic familial ties, which deter violence between groups.
- **Village Drama:** Used to educate communities on the consequences of banditry, though its impact is limited by sporadic violence during events.

Key Insight: While these mechanisms strengthen social cohesion, their sustainability is threatened by pervasive distrust and lack of state support.

## 2. Other Community-Driven Peacebuilding and Conflict Transformation Approaches

Non-state actors employ diverse strategies to address banditry:

- **Localized Peace Education:** Religious leaders leverage Islamic teachings to dissuade bandits, emphasizing the moral imperative of peace.
- **Moulud Celebrations:** Large-scale Islamic festivals (e.g., Maulud) incorporate peace messaging, with reported cases of bandit leaders renouncing violence after attending.
- **Grassroots Networks:** Youth volunteers and local security groups (e.g., Vigilante Groups of Nigeria, VGN) collaborate with state agencies, though resource mismanagement by local officials undermines efforts.

## 3. Complementarity of State-Level and Localized Peace Efforts

The study found mixed evidence of complementarity:

- **Collaboration:** Security committees integrate traditional rulers, vigilantes, and state agencies, enhancing intelligence-sharing and joint operations.
- **Challenges:** State support (e.g., motorcycles, incentives for VGN) is unevenly distributed due to corruption, eroding trust in government-led initiatives.
- **Vigilante Contributions:** Local hunters' knowledge of terrain aids military operations, yet their informal status limits long-term sustainability.

Key Insight: While synergies exist, state-level inefficiencies corruption, poor resource allocation weaken the potential of grassroots partnerships.

## **Conclusion**

This paper challenges the assumptions that armed banditry currently ravaging the Northwest can only be defeated through military operations. Just as it argues further that even different amnesty peace deals and other measures introduced by the state governments are unsustainable but only meant to provide ceasefire and temporary relief. This is because security challenges in the Northwest are deeply localized and therefore require solutionist strategies that are not only rooted in community participatory peacebuilding but also can tackle the drivers of conflicts at their sources. This is the position of this paper as an alternative approach to building sustainable peace and promoting peaceful co-existence in a weaponized environment like the Northwest.

## **Policy Recommendations**

Government should institutionalize and integrate traditional and community-driven peacebuilding mechanisms into state-supported peacebuilding frameworks, ensuring resources and security for their continuity.

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Government should expand partnerships with Islamic clerics for peace education in both rural and urban settings, providing them with materials and logistical support.

Government should streamline peace education that contains traditional peacebuilding elements into the school curricula as a "stand-alone" subject because it can transform violent behaviours, correct social ills, tackle diverse insecurity challenges bedeviling Nigeria and act as a veritable tool to strengthen mutual relationships within the region.

Government should address governance gaps: by curbing corruption in resource distribution and improve accountability in state-local collaborations.

Communities that are directly affected by the crisis should be at the forefront of providing solutions. Doing so promotes organic ownership of peace processes that allow for tailored approaches to address specific needs and root causes of conflict.

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